Interpreter voices: Christopher Guichot de Fortis

A NATO staff interpreter for more than 20 years (and Senior Interpreter for fifteen), Chris is also co-director with Julia Poger-Guichot de Fortis of the “CCIC” — the Cambridge Conference Interpretati

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LL: Chris, if I’ve done my homework correctly, you didn’t get into interpreting right out of university. Could you tell us what came before your interpreting career and what led you to make the switch?

CGdF: Indeed not! After leaving Cambridge University with my degrees, I went straight into the UK police service, where I carried out quite a number of different duties for nine years – beat work, drug squad, criminal investigation department, traffic patrol, etc.

People always ask why I made my career change, and it was basically because I was unhappy with the direction the UK police forces were taking under Margaret Thatcher, and with the difficulties faced at that time by university graduates seeking to find their place in the service.

Working at NATO

LL: So what drew you to NATO?

CGdF: Excellent question! To be quite frank, given that I have a biactive English-French combination thanks to my French father and British mother, after my interpreting studies at Bath University in the UK, I was on the lookout for employers seeking interpreters with my professional profile. I sent out a few letters, and was lucky enough to match the criteria NATO was applying at the time (1987) in its continuing search for staff interpreters.

After having policed the installation of US cruise missiles at RAF Molesworth, I was very aware of the importance, to the world’s stability and wellbeing, of potent weapons remaining in the hands of a respected and mature organization with many checks and balances. NATO fitted - and still fits - that bill.

LL: Tell us what it’s like to work at NATO – the range of meetings you cover, the size of the interpreting staff, and that kind of thing.

CGdF: Wow, talk about a wide-ranging question! How long do I have?

Starting with the simplest bit, there are around 32 staff interpreters at NATO Headquarters in
Brussels at the moment, down from about 40 a couple of years ago. All staffers are biactive or bilingual, with French and English as the two official NATO languages. We also have quite a few meetings involving Russian, for which we usually take on freelancers.

The range of meetings is vast, with literally hundreds of committees, covering legal, medical, technical, geopolitical, military and diplomatic subject matter, almost all of which is classified, as you can imagine.

NATO is an extremely interesting place to work, as of course its challenges directly follow world events, and no two days are the same. By the same token, we interpreters have to be ready for virtually anything at any time, and working hours can be arduous at times of crisis or tension in the world.

**LL:** What is the training programme for student interpreters, which I believe you head?

About ten years ago now I launched a programme at NATO of dummy booth practice sessions for Master’s students from a range of interpreting schools in several countries, who seem keen to take on the challenge of interpreting our unclassified meetings and public diplomacy visits programmes. The demand is high, and our team of four staff interpreters offers these booths most weeks for about 9 months of the year, providing as much feedback and advice as we can manage.

**Cambridge course**

**LL:** You are also co-director of the Cambridge Conference Interpretation Course. How did you get involved with that? Did you always have an interest in teaching?

**CGdF:** The Cambridge course was in fact founded back in the early eighties by Michael Francis, who was for several years NATO chief interpreter. He took me on to assist with it in only my second year at NATO, and I was part of the teaching faculty from 1991 onwards. When Michael decided to retire, we agreed that I’d take over. I’ve been running the course since 2002 in partnership with Julia.

**LL:** Do you also teach elsewhere?

**CGdF:** Since 1990 I have taught quite regularly at a number of interpreting schools: initially EII Mons and ISTI Brussels, then adding Bath and Marie Haps (Brussels) on a less regular basis. I have also examined quite a bit over the years, at these and other schools in France, Belgium and the UK.

I find teaching very motivating, as it’s such a pleasure to be able to introduce youngsters to a profession I greatly value and enjoy. Both training for and access to the profession are difficult to say the least, and it’s a true pleasure to be able to share some of my (increasingly!) lengthy experience, calm the students’ fears and help them into the conference interpreting world.

Julia and I teach a lot together, and at each year’s end we organize a day-long professional seminar for ‘our’ recent graduates, which is really enjoyable and inspirational. We gain so much from the energy, good will and courage of our young protégés!

For the last year or so I’ve also been chairing the BANT (Belgian AIIC Network of Trainers) group, bringing together AIIC members who teach in Belgian interpreting schools for brainstorming and pooling of ideas and experience in the field of teaching conference interpretation.

**LL:** Having just participated in the CCIC for the first time, I’ve seen how much work goes into organization. Could you elaborate on the purpose and philosophy of the course, what goes into choosing the languages to be covered, and finding teachers for all the possible combinations of the
25 or so students you admit. As you say on your website, there is a “method in the madness.”

CGdF: Ah, you can never go too far wrong in quoting Hamlet!

Yes indeed, the CCIC does entail a huge amount of organization, thought and preparation. We usually begin in October or November, which means that Cambridge occupies Julia and myself over an eight-month period each year, with the frenetic but enjoyable climax in August.

The Course (which runs on a not-for-profit basis, with any remaining monies being returned to the students on completion of the course) is there to help spread our belief in the virtues of expert and conscientious performance, and it seems to occupy a fairly unique niche as a high-level continuing education course for experienced practicing conference interpreters.

The cornerstone of the course is the supremely high quality of the teaching faculty, and we are proud and grateful to be able to count on a pool of teachers of the highest standard, as regards their careers, their interpretation and their teaching ability.

We set the bar pretty high and we’re quite demanding of our students, quite a few of whom are staff interpreters and/or members of AIIC. We make no apologies for expecting a very high level of performance, but we also make a point of being flexible and understanding of the various student’s professional, personal and pedagogical needs, which I can tell you is no easy matter.

It would appear, from student feedback over the years, that the CCIC experience is both exhausting and gratifying!

We tend usually to offer French, English, Spanish, German, Italian and Russian, in varying ratios as a function of demand. Our philosophy is to banish interpreters’ fear and trembling, to equip them for anything, to teach pride and humility both, and to encourage them to aim for the sky, mentally and technically. To my mind, our clients deserve our very best efforts at all times, and a stellar level of performance. Some interpreters, in my own experience, are too easily satisfied with their performance, and that is one reason we try to inculcate a new approach to true professionalism as a concept and philosophy.

My motto for the CCIC is: “If it can be said, I can interpret it”.

LL: You’ve written about what a B language is and what is needed to interpret into a non-native tongue. Some interpreters enrol in the CCIC specifically to improve their work into a B, or to move toward upgrading a C. What elements of the course help in this?

CGdF: We do indeed lay a great deal of stress on enhancing the quality of our students’ ‘B’ languages, as I feel this to be a weakness profession-wide. We need to start by endeavouring to get a better handle on what a ‘B’ language actually is, and what it is not! In a world where market forces tend to pressure interpreters into offering ‘B’ languages which are not quite mature, it seems important, for the future of the profession and the benefit of our clients, to raise the bar on ‘B’ languages. This effort involves many many components, which we do our very best to teach in Cambridge. One factor is that the CCIC is held in England, and that the language of general instruction is English, this of course being the ‘B’ that most interpreters seek to acquire.

LL: What’s your favorite aspect of the course?

CGdF: That’s a hard one, as there are so many – there has to be a good reason to keep us all coming back!

I think, if pushed, that I would choose the CCIC community of friends and colleagues, which grows year by year. The groups of students are of the highest calibre, as regards their human and personal qualities, and it is an intense pleasure to get to spend two weeks a year in the company of such
eclectic groups of admirable, motivated and conscientious people. I am referring here both to the students and the teaching staff, and Julia and I learn a great deal, professionally and personally, from each year’s faculty and student group.

A glimpse of personal life

LL: Leaving interpreting aside, what other interests do you have? What do you do to clear your mind and just enjoy yourself?

CGDF: I’m told I do have a big range of interests, but to me this seems quite normal.

I am very active in various Christian churches, with stress on prayer and Christology.

I have also driven in European Championship-level car rallies since I was 20 years old, and continue to do so – rallies are like the booth, with high penalties for mistakes and a need for total concentration and rapid reactions.

I am also deeply involved in charity work, and ran a refugee social and legal service in Brussels for 15 years. I currently chair a similar charity offering assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers.

I had a great and challenging time volunteering on night shifts as a paramedic in Brussels for 15 years, after gaining my emergency medical technician diploma after three years of night school.

When I was younger I played a lot of tennis and, while my advancing years make the muscles and sinews a little more creaky, I still love to play when the occasion offers itself.

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